

as a whole. For to be a Catholic will be to have real zeal, the soul of a martyr like the first believers, or fall off. Many currents coincide, and the paganism in sex matters that is creating the problem discussed here is raising up its own reply from the Church: a new proof that anyone—not only monks and nuns but people living in the thick of social and moral turmoil—'may remain a virgin to the honour of the flesh of Christ'.

FINBAR SYNNOTT, O.P.

THE PROPHETS' APPROACH TO GOD

EVERY nation worthy of the name produces its prophets, and by prophets I mean men who claim to speak to their fellow countrymen in the divine name and with divine authority. For that is the true essence of the prophetic character: not merely the ability to foretell future events, but the claim to speak as an ambassador of God. Miracles and predictions are chiefly the confirmatory signs of the validity of that claim. Of course there are prophets and prophets, false claimants and true, and there have been many who claimed unjustifiably to speak in God's name.

But if every nation has had its prophets, no nation has ever produced any that can compare even remotely with the prophets of Israel, of whom Dr Allen writes with so much understanding and sympathy in his *Prophet and Nation*¹, a book that deserves to be classed with W. R. Smith's great *Prophets of Israel*, published half a century ago. He begins with a chapter on the distinction between those who have come down to us approved as genuine prophets and the now-forgotten throng of their fellow Israelites who belonged to the prophetic caste. Many of the latter were temple officials or hangers-on at the royal court, men who were venal and prepared, like the fortune-tellers of all ages, to adapt their utterances to their income'. The former were outstanding exceptions, few in number, always unpopular in their day, often in prison and generally dying a violent death. The Gospels are eloquent on the character and fate of such men, and their fate is the common fate of genuine prophets: 'no prophet finds acceptance in his own country'. Have we not seen it in our own day?

Dr Allen continues his little book with six excellent studies of those whom he calls Heroes of the Spirit, prophets of Israel who flourished during the two centuries (8th to 6th B.C.) which saw

¹ *Prophet and Nation*. By E. L. Allen. (Nisbet; 7s. 6d.)

the political break-up of the kingdoms of Israel and Juda under the onset of foreign invasion: Amos, Osee, Isaias, Jeremias, Ezechiel and Deutero-Isaias. The mention of Deutero-Isaias furnishes occasion to observe that the author is not a Catholic, and there are places where the Catholic scholar cannot accept the attitude he adopts in his treatment of the biblical narrative. But on the whole he is conservative.

What gives his book a special value is its application to modern times and the modern difficulties which threaten the complete breakdown of Christian civilisation and even of organised society. As he insists again and again, the true prophet was God's champion among the people and often against the people, for it was the nation's disregard of God's rights that made him a prophet of doom. In threatening the destruction of Israel the prophet said in his own way what Plutarch wrote much later about the absolute need there is in human society of the proper reverence for God: 'This is what holds all society together, for it is the foundation and buttress of all law.' And Plutarch only repeated what has always been the settled conviction of wise men of all time. A century earlier Cicero was saying that without religious worship and prayer human life would be robbed of all piety, holiness and religion, with the certain result that everything would be reduced to disturbance and confusion: 'and I know not whether, if you take away piety towards the divine you will not thereby destroy all men's faith in one another, and with it human society altogether along with that most excellent virtue of justice'. That is what is happening in our own day.

Dr Allen shows that the main theme of the prophet is concerned with the transcendent majesty and righteousness of God, 'a righteousness that is absolute and must be maintained at all costs'. Hence it is for men to adapt themselves to that righteousness, and not the other way about. This is good Thomist theology. Therefore the prophet is absolutely uncompromising, very unlike his false brethren who were always ready to compromise for the sake of popularity and personal advantage. It is such compromise that has emasculated Christian dogma and ethics in modern times, especially when described as the restating of traditional dogma and ethics in terms accommodated to the needs and conditions of our age. 'I am Yahweh and I do not change. The word of Yahweh remaineth for ever.' That is the refrain of the true prophet. Hence he is a man who has the unenviable duty of telling his people unwelcome truths, but at the same time truths necessary for the people's welfare and salvation. For example, one of the truths flowing from the doctrine

of the absolute transcendence of God is the truth of God's complete independence of man, even of man represented in the House of Israel, God's chosen people. It was Israel that needed God, not God that needed Israel. There was no necessity on his part to save Israel in order to justify his own prestige among the Gentiles; the dignity of God was well able to look after itself, and it needed no support from Israel or anyone else. True the rôle assigned to Israel by divine Providence was to serve as a sign to the nations of the world; the sign however was to be not what Israel did for God but what was done to Israel by God. Such was the rational theology of the prophets, and it contradicted the blasphemous assumption that God was in some way beholden to Israel. It is not a blasphemy peculiar to the Israelites; as M. Maritain has recently pointed out (*BLACKFRIARS*, May 1948) the great error of modern times from the Renaissance on, has been the belief that God waits for man's initiative before he is able to do anything with him for his good. It finds its natural result in the pride of self-sufficiency and self-righteousness.

Thus it might be said that the true mission of the prophets was to indicate the right approach to God, an approach that cannot be summed up better than in Maritain's words: 'first there is the movement of descent, the movement by which the divine plenitude, the prime source of existence, descends into human reality to permeate it and vivify it. For God infuses into every creature goodness and loveability together with being, and has the *first* initiative in every good activity. Then there is the movement of ascent, which is the answer of man by which human reality takes the *second* initiative, activates itself towards the unfolding of its energies and towards God. From the point of view of the Absolute, the first movement is obviously what matters most: to receive from God is of greater moment than for man to give to God, and man can only give what he has received'. As Dr Allen says, the distinguishing mark between the true and the false prophet of Israel is that the latter tends to identify the fortunes of Yahweh and Israel, while the former insists on God's independence: 'he has seen that Israel might even cease to be and Yahweh would not merely remain untouched; from the catastrophe he would emerge more glorious than ever before. . . . He has a sense of Yahweh's majesty which reduces Israel to insignificance; yet in that very insignificance he finds ground for an appeal to mercy'.

And this is the second characteristic of the prophet's message; he insists not only on God's transcendence in being but also on the transcendence of the divine goodness, which manifests itself especi-

ally in mercy; and mercy means goodness exercised in favour of the wretched and miserable. That is why the prophets stand out pre-eminently as the social reformers of their day. They remember and recall how Yahweh has always figured in the history of Israel as the protector of the weak and the oppressed, the Father of the widow and the orphan. 'He protects Agar in the wilderness and brings Joseph forth from the dungeon. When he appears in the burning bush to Moses it is as the champion of the slave against the task-master. . . . The situation which Amos describes is that of a society divided into the exploiters and the exploited. What the historian might speak of as natural prosperity he sees to be the spoliation of the many for the enrichment of the few; what some would dismiss as the misfortunes incidental to such a large scale readjustment of economic activities he brands as crime and sin.' As I have said before, all this is very much up-to-date now that religion has fallen into such disrepute because of the accusation that it is on the wrong side in the matter of social injustice. Those who read the prophets will know that some of their most violent denunciations were called forth by the manner in which 'the most punctilious performance of so-called religious duties became consistent with the most shameless disregard of the claims of one's fellow-man'. Are we free from that? It hardly seems so when one reads the horrible account of the condition of the native labourers drawn into the industrial machine in South Africa, described by one of our Dominican missionaries there (*Moving Population*, BLACKFRIARS, August). It is things like that which drive home the lesson that atheistic Communism and its attendant evils have not sprung up by accident. Religion divorced from morality is always a scandal; as the prophets expressed it, such things done by those who profess religion are irreconcilable with the transcendent holiness and righteousness of God, and that is what causes the name of God to be blasphemed. Hence their constant refrain: do right and things will go right, no matter how hopeless they may seem.

That is the third and last aspect of the prophetic message to which attention may be drawn here: the prophet is the man of unquenchable hope. For 'as he contemplates the moribund and seemingly hopeless condition of his people, the assurance comes to him that in Yahweh there are inexhaustible resources of just that vitality which is lacking in them, and that with Him there is the possibility of renewal'. Again a very salutary lesson for ourselves today when the future looks so hopeless. The remedy against despair is the prophet's remedy; as a recent writer in BLACKFRIARS has put it very aptly, we have to rid ourselves of atheism: not only the

militant atheism of Communists, but the practical atheism of us apathetic Catholics. The prophet was so full of hope because he was like a man who had been admitted into the counsels of God; his vision was enlarged and a glorious prospect revealed itself to the eye of his mind. It was a very different prospect from that imagined by many of his fellow Israelites. They were so full of their own importance in the eyes of God that they were persuaded the glorification of Israel was to be brought about by the destruction of the Gentile nations through the vengeance of Yahweh. But on the contrary, as Isaias makes so clear, 'the nations of the world (were neither) mere victims of the divine displeasure with their sin, nor mere blind instruments in the hands of Yahweh for the chastisement of his people; they (were) fully as human as Israel, with their age-long yearnings for truth and their need for just what Israel could give'. Israel was a nation chosen and called not to privilege but to responsibility; its task was to share with men what it had received.

Israel failed in its task through a mistaken sense of its own importance and the contemptuous pride that flows from such a mentality. But it is the sort of error that might easily be a common danger for us. Our threatened Christian civilisation will not be saved by the destruction of those who are seeking its downfall, but by more earnest efforts to share with them what we have received. The path is clearly marked out for us by the prophets.

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THE WORD IN ACTION

WHEN the Cistercians decided to establish themselves in the wilds of Yorkshire and set about cultivating the waste land at 'Fountains', building their cells, offices and Abbey Church, the outward sign of their faith was in Labour, and hard at that. The uncultured country men of the neighbourhood were soon drawn into this great activity; not only stonemasons and tillers of the soil but tradesmen of all kinds gravitated to the site, caught up in the exuberance of those who were setting up a home they purposed to share with Almighty God. It followed that in the course of two or three generations the buildings were finished, the pictures of adornment painted, the images of veneration carved and on their pedestals, the vestments woven—and an understanding of Peace born in the midst of this now large community so that even the young men, whose great grandfathers and great great uncles